

Ambiguity and Ambivalence in PC Music

A female voice cheerfully announces, “Lipgloss Twins!” Her slight lisp and immaculate pop-style vocal processing makes her sound completely artificial. A synthesized bell with sustained high overtones bends in pitch to create a disjointed, arrhythmic atonal melody. At the same time, the obnoxious high-frequency squeaking of the stretched neck of a balloon struggling to release its compressed air fades in and out. A clicky, dead-sounding synth-tom bass sound coupled with a tambourine sample does not help to establish any tonality or rhythm. Clicky hi-hats and microscopic pops of varying pitch play sixteenth notes and cut out seemingly at random. The girl from before complains, “I don’t wanna be a twin,” then repeatedly overlaps various parts of a sample in which she says, “I just wanna fit-fit-fit-fit in, to that thing.” Then, a sample of two similar-sounding female voices seems to morph to sound younger and younger, saying, “What what what what what what” with an inflection that suggests a mimicry of urban braggadocio. A rubber band comes in, aggressively plucked so that it buzzes, serving as the balloon squeak’s lower and more percussive rubbery counterpart. It all sounds exquisitely produced; the mix is jarringly clean, and despite the chaos, sounds ironically sparse. We are listening to “Wannabe,” by PC Music’s Lipgloss Twins. So far, we have heard the first seventeen seconds¹.

Lipgloss Twins is a collaboration between London electronic producer A. G. Cook and Dominik Dvorak, who produces under the name of Felicita. In June 2013, A. G. Cook established his online label, PC Music, consisting of a SoundCloud page which offers free downloads of almost every song and a series of bizarre webpages designed individually for each release. Operating under various aliases, A. G. Cook and his partner Danny L. Harle have created a roster of artists, who often are pseudonymous, anonymous, and/or female. PC Music is rapidly surging in both popularity and influence, receiving coverage in *Vogue*² and *Pitchfork*³, and even influencing artists such as Diplo⁴, Madonna⁵ and Kanye West⁶. The genre-elusive music, which can feature pitched-up vocals, zipping synth elements, and unfamiliar textures, contains combinations of elements of j-pop, nu jack swing, bubblegum trance, early ringtones, contemporary pop, grime, hardstyle, and so many others that it is usually unclassifiable. PC Music's aesthetic falls on various points in the scale between hyper-pop and surrealism, depending on the artist and track. This aesthetic makes sense, given that A. G. Cook is influenced by both the radio-pop producer Max Martin and the eclectic, experimental Frank Zappa⁷. Cook, with his art-school education and his appreciation of mainstream pop, creates and releases music that is both highbrow and lowbrow at the same time, sharing this paradoxical capability with Rick Rubin⁸. The combination of clashing musical elements and cultural references contributes to PC Music's ambiguity, which creates a strong feeling of ambivalence. "Wannabe," by Lipgloss Twins, induces ambivalence by taking the use of conflicting ideas to the extreme.

The coexistence of highbrow and lowbrow, arguably the essence of hip-hop, enables PC Music to target the mainstream while enthralling the avant-garde. Producer Rick Rubin was the first to fully implement this ethos, unlocking the full potential of hip-hop production as an art form⁹. Writer Dan Charnas says that hip-hop was so successful because it was able to "communicate the sophisticated ... while provoking a corporeal, visceral response."¹⁰ "Wannabe" is able to communicate an incredibly sophisticated message, while also inducing a visceral reaction, except where hip-hop causes head-bobbing and dancing, "Wannabe" is viscerally confusing and overwhelming; it feels like a thrill-ride. Just as A. G. Cook's selection of PC Music material favors that which is paradoxically pop and anti-pop, "Rick Rubin always went for art

that embodied opposites¹¹.” Ric Menello, the doorman at NYU’s Weinstein Hall who helped ghostwrite Rubin through his college career, explains Rick’s artistic approach: “Rubin aimed to create, in his words, ‘the worst shit.’ But he did it with the intention and all-consuming focus of an artist.”¹² Rubin’s philosophy is apparent even on his first major production, T La Rock’s “It’s Yours.” For Rick, “everything had to sound huge-the bass lower, the vocals sharper, the drums louder, the scratches explosive.”¹³ The deep bass was hard enough to make people dance and shake the subwoofers of big party systems and car stereos, but an insightful art-philosopher can appreciate the crisp, sparse minimalism as a meticulously crafted product.

“Wannabe” aesthetically draws from some of the work of Frank Zappa, who created music that was paradoxically lowbrow and highbrow, as well as simultaneously attractive and repulsive. In his only known interview, A. G. Cook mentions “Frank Zappa’s Synclavier stuff”¹⁴ as one of his many influences. Certain tropes in “Wannabe” are strikingly similar to sonic elements in Zappa’s obscure, posthumously released 2011 album “Feeding the Monkies at Ma Maison.” The track, “Buffalo Voice,” contains “a violin played to sound like a buzzing fly and daughter Moon Unit Zappa’s spoken voice,”¹⁵ which are sonically analogous to the buzzing balloon and young, spoken samples in “Wannabe.” Furthermore, the Lipgloss Twins track imitates the album’s arrhythmic arrangements and chaotic textures. Apart from these aesthetic borrowings, the track also shares Zappa’s artistic philosophy. In a memorandum that he sent to journalists as part of a press kit for his 1971 film, *200 Motels*, Zappa argues that “IT IS, IN SPITE OF ALL EVIDENCE TO THE CONTRARY, THEORETICALLY POSSIBLE TO BE ‘HEAVY’ AND STILL HAVE A SENSE OF HUMOR. (*We direct this specifically toward people who suffer feelings of ambivalence when given an opportunity to laugh at themselves*).”¹⁶ Not only does Zappa embrace the combination of lowbrow humor and highbrow conceptual content, he also is aware that ambivalence results from the coexistence of conflicting references, such as simultaneous heaviness and lightness.

The clean, poppy, produced sound of “Wannabe” helps it to be attractive; however, when combined with the repulsive, chaotic elements, it creates a feeling of uneasiness that is characteristic of ambivalence. When asked if he consciously pursues overwhelming, contrasting

complexity in his music, A. G. Cook comments that he is interested in how “pop music and commercial imagery ... [have] the potential to be overwhelming, extravagant and banal all at the same time.” He then adds that “mixing ‘high culture’ with pop culture has lost its radical edge to the extent that it's more or less mainstream.”¹⁷ Cook is very aware of the highbrow-lowbrow approach epitomized by hip-hop and Zappa. Hip-hop infiltrated mainstream culture years ago; the top three spots in the 2003 United States Billboard Pop charts were hip-hop songs. Naturally, as hip-hop entered mainstream culture, it brought its core highbrow-lowbrow idea along with it. Then, if A. G. Cook says that high-low is a tired paradox, why is it present in his and Felicita’s work on “Wannabe”?

A. G. Cook evolves the long-established coexistence of highbrow and lowbrow elements by exploring “a subtler and possibly more compelling way of engaging with these ideas, where shock value and direct irony is replaced with ambiguity.” Cook’s musical and visual tropes, such as “kitsch imagery, catchy hooks, synthetic colours and fun sound effects,” combined with an “over-the-top use of structure and layout,” contribute to the ambiguous nature of the work. This ambiguity presents “a sort of immersive world of ideas and references” to anyone who attempts to determine what the work is trying to communicate, while capturing the “overwhelming, extravagant and banal potential of commercial work” that fascinates Cook¹⁸. The immersive world of ideas and references in “Wannabe” is quite evident in Philip Sherburne’s description of the song in his Pitchfork article on PC Music. Sherburne writes, “Overload is in full effect on the first single from Lipgloss Twins, right down to a short video segment featuring the two “Twins” that plays simultaneously with the embedded SoundCloud audio and concludes just as the song is wrapping up its own introduction.”¹⁹ Yes: in addition to all the chaos that occurs in the first seventeen seconds of the track, visitors to the song’s official website are treated to a video of two young, attractive twins energetically exchanging non-sequiturs about such “topics” as their favorite lip gloss (slime green and toothpaste blue), movies (one twin asks if the other has seen *Twilight*; the other twin does not answer the question), and cute boys (actually, “piggy” and “yummy” boys). The use of the formal element of layout, where the chaotic video plays at the same time as the chaotic music, creates an overwhelming, extravagant experience that is also

extremely banal, as the twins' topics of discussion are decidedly vapid²⁰. For Sherburne, this experience raises many questions: "Where did they find these 'Twins'? If they're speaking in American accents, why are they employing British grammatical quirks like 'different to'? Why would a pig eat stationery? And what the hell does 'My genes are ripped' mean?"²¹ Sherburne is immersed in Wannabe's world of bizarre, yet paradoxically clichéd ideas and references, yet he has no idea what the song is actually about.

Amazingly, Frank Zappa presents this immersive world of ambiguity in his *200 Motels* memorandum. He encourages his reader to imagine the head of a pin with an infinitely detailed illustration on it, but imagine it not as a pin, but as a musical note with a corresponding physical, visceral action, like raising an eyebrow. Then, Zappa suggests covering North America and most of Europe to a depth of eighty feet with these abstracted pins, except the depth is not geometric; it is in the domain of time, stretching across decades. Next, he prompts the reader to "imagine that you could be living there and working there and not even know it." He claims that this abstract world is a controlled, intentional design²². PC Music is constructed as a modern continuation of Zappa's ambiguous mass of countless references, exploring society's progression through the internet age and into the new millennium by overwhelmingly immersing us in all of its aspects at once.

Ambiguity and ambivalence share the same prefix: *ambi*, which is Latin for "two ways." Ambiguity, when deconstructed in Latin, means "leading in two directions," where *ambi* means "two ways" and *agere* means "to lead." For someone to experience ambivalence, they must have strong conflicting feelings. Ambiguity causes these conflicting feelings by leading in two (or more) conflicting directions. In this way, the ambiguity in "Wannabe," which leads toward both banality and extravagance, directly and deliberately produces a profound degree of ambivalence. In the words of Fact Magazine's Joe Moynihan, "Wannabe" is PC Music "at its most 'Err, do I actually like this? Am I merely impressed by it? Or am I fucking terrified of it?'"²³ Moynihan clearly illustrates the strong, conflicting feelings that Lipgloss Twins induce with "Wannabe."

With such a profound, deliberate conceptual focus driving his label, it is no wonder that even in its current, underground phase, PC Music is making waves in the industry. The PC Music

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releases that fall more on the hyper-pop side of the spectrum still have an extraordinary ambiguity that can inspire all sorts of conflicting, yet poignant feelings. What sounds, at first, like lowbrow mainstream pop music turns out to contain an overwhelming amount of cultural references that don't explicitly communicate anything, but instead create an immersive, ambiguous world. No current musical phenomenon has this level of conceptual basis and spot-on execution. Even if the big-name producers steal PC Music's sound, they will never grasp A. G. Cook's brilliant artistic vision. PC Music is hip-hop's successor as the next conceptually driven musical movement, and is set to change pop music forever.

(More)

Endnotes

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